



Historic District Commission
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February 23, 2016

To Our Michigan State Legislators:

We, the members of the Three Rivers Historic District Commission (HDC), are writing to oppose HB 5232, either in its current form or in substitute form. We believe that the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act—Act 169 of 1970—has been an effective tool for historic preservation and economic development and should remain in effect unaltered.

The impetus for this proposed legislation in Michigan was a failed attempt to establish a Local Historic District in East Grand Rapids. The bill's authors claim that they are proposing this legislation to protect property owners' rights and to provide more local control and accountability. The East Grand Rapids situation is actually a perfect example of how the existing legislation is working as intended and is already providing local control as necessary. East Grand Rapids decided against going forward with a Historic District and they are not being forced to do so; local citizens decided democratically that they didn't think a Historic District would be helpful for their community. Many other communities, including Three Rivers, have decided for themselves to establish Historic Districts through a long process of identifying and inventorying historic resources and then voting the district into existence through local ordinance. A local Historic District Commission (HDC) provides oversight, education, and other helpful resources; the HDC is comprised of engaged community members who are appointed by the City Commission and who undergo significant preservation training. Local control and accountability doesn't seem to be an issue.

Most Historic District Commissioners in Three Rivers have invested heavily in our Historic District through major rehabilitation projects, downtown business ownership, downtown residency, and countless volunteer hours working for the HDC and Michigan Main Street. The Historic District actually protects our property rights and property values by maintaining the historic character of the district as a whole—which thereby protects the financial (and other) investments we've made in our properties. In a commercial district like Three Rivers, where the buildings are literally connected, it is important for property owners to know that the work being done on neighboring properties will meet the national Standards for Rehabilitation and will ensure the economic viability of the district for years to come. Many building and business owners specifically choose to locate in Historic Districts for these reasons.

Michigan has made placemaking the core of our economic development strategy and historic preservation is an integral piece of this strategy. Historic preservation has proven to be one of the most effective drivers of economic development throughout the country. Historic places draw investment and contribute to a unique sense of place in our communities, thereby attracting and retaining talent. Innovative developers have transformed historic buildings into the hub of the new economy by creating new spaces for creative professionals, retail, restaurants, and more in beautiful and unique historic buildings. The proposed legislation would make it more difficult to start and sustain historic districts and for communities like ours to access state and federal resources designed to support best practices for historic building renovation.

In summary, the existing legislation is working as intended and does not need to be revised. The establishment of Historic Districts, a democratic process at every stage of the process, is working for communities across the state, for property owners, for business owners, and for developers. Instead of crippling the law through unnecessary changes and jeopardizing the common trust of our architectural heritage, let's celebrate how well the law has worked to transform cities across our beautiful state into more unique and viable places to live, work, and play.

Sincerely,
The Three Rivers Historic District Commission

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